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Tutor-Facilitated Digital Literacy Acquisition in
Hard-to-Serve Populations: A Research Project

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Program Design: Volunteering in a Digital Literacy Program

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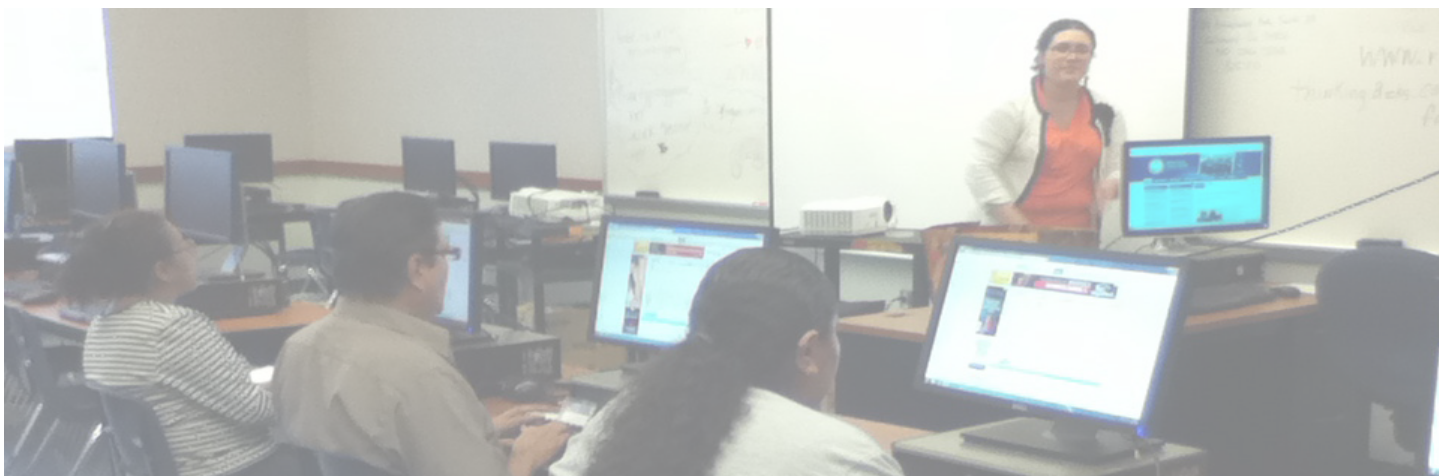


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Volunteering in a Digital Literacy Program

Digital Literacy Acquisition in Brief: *What Research Tells Us about Program Design*

Overview

These findings are from an Institute of Museum and Library Services funded research project that interviewed more than 100 participants within a multi-state Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP) Sustainable Broadband Adoption (SBA) project. The BTOP project included six lead partners who developed local networks of community organizations to provide adults with an opportunity to learn to use computers and the Internet.

While these networks created a variety of implementation strategies and ways to serve learners' needs, they shared these key features:



- *curriculum on the Learner Web, an online platform designed specifically for adult learners, which included digital literacy material in English and Spanish*
- *in-person tutor support*
- *the opportunity to work at their own pace and identify their own goals*



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Key Discoveries

- Tutors sustained motivation when they could tangibly see that their contribution led to learners' growth.
- Tutors experienced growth -- participation gave them an environment to grow their knowledge and develop skills as they worked with learners who had a variety of reasons for being in the program: a diverse array of personal, education and employment goals.
- The constancy of a lab coordinator was key for sustaining volunteers. As one tutor noted, learners come and go, but the lab coordinator was always there to anchor the program.
- Flexible scheduling, time to explore, a forum for asking questions, and in some cases working alongside others helped tutors develop a set of flexible skills.
- Coordinators acknowledged the challenges of volunteering and provided the training volunteers need to be successful. They also checked with tutors regularly to ask for input about program and learner needs.
- Coordinators found unique ways to encourage tutors and show that they were appreciated. For example, coordinators would provide gift cards, thank you notes, weekly email updates, and other tokens of gratitude.

Voices from the Field

A tutor described getting involved with tutoring in the digital literacy program:

"I enjoy helping people. I don't really have any incentive other than seeing that they get something out of it. So I stop by during the day before I go to school, I hang around for a couple of hours. I just want to make sure that I can assist."

When asked what kept him continuing to volunteer, he reflected on his desire to make a difference.

"It's not about money with me or I wouldn't have gone into education. I enjoy helping people. Everybody needs a little helping at some point of time. You shouldn't just leave people behind. That's not a good thing, not in my book."

His time as a volunteer was driven by a desire to make a difference and to provide helpful learning experiences for others. He wanted to be able to say to learners, 'Welcome to the digital world' and to know they would be able to continue exploring, learning, and growing beyond their participation in the program.

On the Ground

Tutors stayed with the program for a number of reasons, but achieving a level of personal satisfaction was vitally important. One tutor explained what kept her going:

"I really have a passion for being with people...The reason is because I feel I get so much out of it. I feel like I interact with so many people from so many different backgrounds, religion, et cetera, that it's given me a broader example of what the world is. About what different people out there are wanting out of life." ~Tutor

Lab coordinators acknowledged the passion tutors brought to the program and supported them in a variety of ways.

"Your tutors are volunteering so you have to be very flexible. If they can't come in you can't get flustered. I cover for my tutors a lot because they're not getting paid. They're here out of the goodness of their heart. So I make up for their time. I think that's just part of being a coordinator too. You have to really learn to juggle...Ask your tutors what they need. Am I communicating enough with you? Is how we set up our tutor schedules, is that ok with you? Just really be open with your tutors and ask them what they need. And if they have any input for the program. I think that's what makes a good coordinator. Take criticism. I have. You know, things that don't work." ~ Lab Coordinator

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What Do These Findings Mean For Your Work?

Understanding the motivations of a tutor and identifying the qualities that lead to successful tutoring are paramount for our work. When new learners sit down in front of a computer they are putting their trust in that “helper” and in our program. But the tutor also needs to feel valued. Some tutors are comfortable just “hanging out” and helping, while others need more structure.

Setting up the lab to ensure that you can meet the multitude of preferences is tricky but it can be done. The project gave us the opportunity to experiment with structure and processes, allowing for the best fit for our program.

~ Program Administrator



Acknowledgements & Further Information

These research efforts were informed and supported by a National Advisory Committee and a Research Applications Committee made up of professionals who support adult learners.

More information about the project, research findings, publications, and project data can be found in PDX Scholar at:

http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/digital_literacy_acquisition/

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Digital Literacy Acquisition in Brief: What Research Tells Us about...

Language Learners

- Tutors' Perspectives
- The Role of Online Materials
- The Learner/Tutor Relationship
- Learners' Perspectives

Program Design

- Tutor-facilitated Digital Literacy Acquisition
- The Learner Path
- Volunteering in a Digital Literacy Program
- Learning Digital Skills in a Time-limited Program
- Learning Digital Skills in a Corrections Setting

Tutors

- Personal Qualities of Tutors
- Tutoring Strategies and Organizing Learning
- The Tutor/Learner Relationship

Learners

- Development of Self-confidence
- Measuring Success
- Impact
- Learners Who Become Tutors
- Self-paced Learning